

Elderly and Addictions

The definition of an **addiction**, according to a medical dictionary, is “a persistent, compulsive dependence on a behavior or substance....Addiction has been extended, however, to include mood-altering behaviors or activities. Some researchers speak of two types of addictions: substance addictions (for example, alcoholism, drug abuse, and smoking); and process addictions (for example, gambling, spending, shopping, eating, and sexual activity).

The elderly suffer from problems of addiction – to alcohol, nicotine, prescription and street drugs, gambling and food – like every other segment of the population. One major difference is that the problem is often hidden, un- or under-diagnosed, because family and professionals miss the warning signs or think these are merely signs of aging.

Some researchers and clinicians see two general types of seniors who have problems with addictions: “the survivors” who have been addicted for many years and are now turning 60; and those who begin later in life – often triggered by stressors such as retirement, poor health, loss of a spouse or financial concerns. The most common addiction is to alcohol – it’s legal, easy to obtain, and “socially” acceptable, in moderation. When seniors, who have been social drinkers, continue to drink the same amounts they can run into problems because of its higher rate of absorption in the elderly. In addition, many seniors take prescription medications and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs. The combination of medications and alcohol can have adverse reactions. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health has published a pamphlet entitled *Healthy Aging: Medications and Alcohol* which can provide a lot of useful information and is available in the social service office at the senior center. Alcohol is not the only drug that seniors use. Beside prescription and OTC drugs, seniors may use marijuana, nicotine, and opiates. All have the potential of becoming addictive and significantly dangerous when combined with alcohol, prescription and OTC medications.

Addiction to drugs and alcohol isn’t the only addictive behavior seen in seniors. While ‘food addiction’ may seem laughable to many, researchers confirm that addictive drugs use the same neural pathways as food and that it is now established that a person can be as addicted to unhealthy food habits as to smoking or consuming alcohol! “Weight gain in older age is as serious as it is in younger people, even if weight remains stable during the first half of life,” says Tamara Harris, MD, of the National Institute on Aging in Bethesda, Md. “The unhealthiest pattern is continuously gaining weight throughout life, which results in a risk for type II diabetes.” Because it may make us feel good, it’s as difficult to stop overeating as it is to stop smoking or gambling.

Gambling is another under-reported addiction - it is rare for someone to brag that they lost their month’s pay (or social security check) at the track or Foxwoods – especially when they believe they’ll win big next time. Some view gambling as a recreational activity, like playing cards or Scrabble. For many it is a significant problem.